

Repent and Live!

Mom told 12-year-old Tommy to clean his room. Even though Tommy was normally tidy, every room needs a good cleaning every once in a while. Tommy quickly chirped, “Sure thing, mom.” But he never did. He just kept playing his video game. Mom also told 9-year-old Sammy to clean his room. Sammy was a slob. You could never even see the floor in his room it was so cluttered. His knee-jerk reaction was, “I don’t want to.” But when he stepped in his room and could not find his baseball glove, he realized that mom was right. He started cleaning and just kept going. Before long, he room was cleaner than it had ever been.

A little while later, mom checked on Sloppy Sammy and was surprised to see how clean his room was. It was not the cleanest room in the world, mind you. There was still a smelly sock under the bed and he forgot to dust the bookshelf, but mom was still very happy and gave him a hug. Then mom checked on Tidy Tommy. When she saw that he did not do a thing, she scolded him. Johnny snapped back, “I cleaned my room last week. Why do I have to do it again? My room is not THAT dirty. My friends’ rooms are messier.” Griping at mom never goes well.

About 600 years before Jesus was born, the Old Testament Israelites griped at God and it did not go well. They had turned against the true God and worshiped the made-up idols of the other nations. In love, the Lord sent prophets to warn them that following the wrong gods would bring eternal judgement upon themselves. But they did not listen. Finally, in tough love, the Lord allowed the Babylonians to invade Israel and carry the people away as slaves. There in Babylon, the Israelites whined, “It’s not fair. Our fathers and grandfathers are the ones who started worshiping false idols, but we’re the ones who ended up as slaves.” They quoted a Jewish proverb (:2), “**The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.**” That’s a way of saying that the parents did something wrong but the children had to suffer for it. Those Israelites did not take responsibility for their own actions. Yes, their ancestors started worshiping idols, but they continued the practice. They were not innocent.

Even though they wrongly accused God of being unfair, he still cared about them. He did not want them to die as unbelievers and end up in hell. One of the good guys who believed but got carried away to Babylon with the others was the prophet Ezekiel. God used Ezekiel to point out their sins to them. Our Old Testament lesson is the first few and last few verses of Ezekiel 18.

In between those sections, Ezekiel tells the story of a grandpa, a dad, and a son. The grandpa believed in the true God. He admitted that he was a sinner and trusted in God for salvation. He showed his faith by doing his best to follow the commandments. Ezekiel explained that such a man would live. Through faith, he would get into heaven. That guy – Ezekiel continued – had a son who thumbed his nose at God and lived a terribly sinful life. His sinful lifestyle reflected his lack of faith. Such a man, Ezekiel explained, would die. Through his unbelief, he would end up in hell. That fellow had a son who saw what a mess his dad made of his life he did not want to end up like that. He looked to God for forgiveness and strength. Faith in his heart showed itself by doing his best to keep the commandments. Such a man, the grandson, would live. Through faith, he will get into heaven. God used that story about the three generations to prove that he was not unfair. He did not punish some people for the sins of others. That the Old Testament Israelites were suffering was proof that they were sinful.

Still, those Old Testament Israelites in Babylon complained that God was unfair, that he was punishing them for something that was not their fault. They whined (:25 and 29), “**The way of the Lord is not just.**” Through Ezekiel the Lord shot back (:25 and 29), “**Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?**” In other words, “I am not being unfair. You guys are guilty as sin and you don’t think there should be any consequences. THAT would be unfair.”

Just like God’s Old Testament people, we often like to blame others for our sins. Mom rebukes her son for swinging a fist at his brother and he retorts, “But he hit me first.” If we argue with someone, instead of admitting that we should not be arguing, we try to blame the other person, “You started it.” Instead of admitting that we could return more of God’s money to him than spending it on ourselves, we defend our selfishness by saying, “Well, I give more money to the ministry than most.” We instinctively get defensive when things aren’t right because we like to defend our precious ego. Instead of admitting that we are flawed, we like to blame others. We are all just little children who have grown older.

Instead of admitting our sins, our sinful nature wants us to pat ourselves on the back and say, “I’m a good person. I did not get arrested this last week. I came to church this morning. I have been nice to other people. I have not lied recently. I’m not perfect, of course, but I’m not like those other people who do bad things. Sure, I’ve used God’s name to swear, but that’s only when I’m upset. And, OK, I lost my temper, but they deserve it.” We do not want to admit that sin is in us and oozes out of us with less than perfect actions, words and attitudes. Then, when life gets bumpy, it is so easy to complain. “God, why I am stuck in this lousy job? How did I end up married to

such a loser? Why did my children turn out so bad? Why is my health suffering, God? Why can't I have a more money like others? God, it's not fair."

You see, if we want God to be perfectly fair, then we should all be howling in hell already. Before we complain that life is unfair, let's take a walk to Calvary and look at Jesus hanging on the cross. That was unfair. He did nothing, NOTHING, wrong and yet he got blamed for every sin in the history of the world. He did not just suffer some hiccups and hurdles in life. He suffered hell itself as he was on punished on the cross. Now, because God already punished Jesus for your sins, he is not going to punish you. Your sins are forgiven.

Certainly, not everything in our lives is perfect. We struggle and suffer, sometimes more than others, sometimes a lot. We hurt. We get discouraged. We wonder why. A lot of things that happen to us in life do not make sense. It sometimes seems that God is unfair. My friends, God wants you to know that he is not punishing you. He already punished Jesus in your place. He permits that bad and sad things in this world to be constant reminders to us that we are living in a broken world – a world broken by sin. By God grace in Christ, though, you are already saved. The Lord does not want you to end up in hell. He does not want anyone to end up in hell. He sent Jesus to take away the sin of the whole world. Through Ezekiel, he practically shouts (:32), **"I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign. Lord Repent and live!"**

God constantly reaches out with his endless love. We see that in this morning's gospel lesson. If you think that politics are intense these days, consider how things were during Holy Week in Jerusalem. Both political parties – the Pharisees and the Sadducees – were united in their attacks on Jesus. But they did not just want to keep him out of office. They wanted to kill him. The only reason they did not is because Jesus scored very high in the popularity poll and the people would have attacked the Jewish leaders if they tried to hurt Jesus. So, they relentlessly attacked Jesus with tricky questions and accusations. Instead of attacking back, though, Jesus reached out to them in love. Jesus told a story, a parable, that is similar to my silly story about Tidy Tommy and Sloppy Sammy. He then asked the Jewish leaders which son made God happy. They had to answer that the younger finally did the right thing. Jesus was leading them to recognize themselves in the older son. He was leading to recognize that they were sinful so they would look to him for salvation. Even though they fought against him, Jesus was still reaching out to them.

Our God is a God of endless love. If God had given up on his Old Testament people, he could have simply sent a bolt of lightning to kill them all, or

given them all a fatal heart-attack, or infected them with a deadly virus. If he had given up on them, he would not have used the Babylonians to give them a wake-up call. If he had given up on them, he would not have sent Ezekiel to preach to them. If he had given up on you, he would not have made sure that Ezekiel wrote this chapter 18 and preserved it for 2600 years and made sure that you were here this morning so that that you could learn from it this morning. To each one us, God is pleading with love, "Repent and live."

Mom was not happy with Tidy Tommy whose room looked pretty good, but had a rebellious attitude. But mom was happy with the Sloppy Sammy whose room was not perfect but who changed his ways and tried to please mom. Likewise, the perfectly polished never-miss-a-Sunday-member who thinks that he is morally superior than others is the one who is spiritually dead and in danger of hell fire. While the drug addict who got arrested again and again and spent considerable time in prison, but who humbly admits his sin and gratefully looks to Christ for salvation is the one who is spiritually alive and will live forever. Jesus told the pompous political leaders of his day (Matthew 21:31), **"I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you."**

Our sinful nature is always trying to lead us away from trusting in Jesus. Even when we fight against temptation with God's help and avoid a nagging sin, our sinful nature likes to suggest that we have earned something special from God. Someone who goes through the motions of Christianity by doing and saying all the right things, but does not examine his heart and confess his sins and cling to Christ will suffer forever. But the poor sinner who realizes his guilt and repents of his sin, is acknowledged and treated by God as an obedient child. His former sins are no longer remembered. No matter what sins we have committed – sexual immorality, alcohol or drug abuse, abortion, stealing, swearing, rebelling against the laws of parents or the government, cheating on taxes, selfish pride, or whatever – they are completely gone. It's just as if you never did it. When God looks at you, he does not see your sinful past. He just sees you now as a perfectly pure saint who is destined for glory.

In one of my Catechism lessons, I suggest to the students that they take a bar of soap and make the sign of the cross on their mirror. Then I tell them to look in the mirror and say, "You are beautiful." You are beautiful because Jesus washed all your sins away, not with soap, but with his blood. Try it some time. Even if you don't actually put a soap cross on your mirror, do it in your heart. Each day in your prayers, admit that you are a sinner. Then rejoice, rejoice, rejoice, and show in your life, that Jesus is your Savior. Repent and live. Amen.